

# NEW JERSEY EDUCATION ORGANIZING COLLABORATIVE

PATERSON EDUCATION ORGANIZING COMMITTEE • EDUCATION LAW CENTER • ABBOT LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE  
ONE NEWARK EDUCATION COALITION-SEOC • JERSEY CITY EDUCATION ORGANIZING COMMITTEE-SEOC • PATERSON EDUCATION FUND

## Building Relationships



## Building Power

Lauren Wells, Ph.D., Project Coordinator, New Jersey Education Organizing Committee (NJEOC)  
State Board of Education Testimony, January 21, 2009

I am here today with many parents and other community members from Newark, Jersey City, Paterson, and Asbury Park to address the issues we see with the DOE's Secondary Transformation proposal and to strengthen the voice of local residents in district and state education policy making.

Many NJEOC members here today have expressed appreciation for the DOE's commitment to raising the overall quality of public education. They have also agreed with the DOE that education in public middle and high schools needs improvement and revitalization, particularly in Abbott districts such as Newark, Jersey City, Paterson, and Asbury Park. However, we feel that there are significant issues in secondary schools that would make it impossible for the DOE's plan, as currently configured, to be successful for all kids in all districts. The challenges that face our schools, like the challenges that face the Nation, are great. Like our new President, we believe these challenges "will be met."

However, the DOE's plan would increase high school graduation requirements, require specific college prep classes of all students, and create mandatory end of course assessments for these subjects without also putting in place the systems, supports, and resources that would allow all children to successfully meet these requirements.

The schools in our communities are in critical condition. This year their funding has increased by a mere 2%, lagging far behind the annual increases in contract and utilities costs that districts accrue from year to year. We are concerned that implementing this proposal without any preliminary assessment of whether or not the resources that are needed for students to be successful exist in all districts, or impact whether or not student success increases, is putting the cart before the horse. We believe that implementing such requirements without serious consideration of what districts like ours will need to bring all students to the level required to successfully pass courses and assessments—resources that include textbooks, on-going professional development for teachers and school leaders, and strong relationships between schools and communities—will set the stage for persistent failure, will increase students' apathy toward school, and will push more students out of classrooms onto street corners, and perhaps even prison.

Very few of the I and J districts currently have policies in place that require the courses mandated under the DOE's plan, where the Abbott districts overwhelmingly require these courses. Despite this "policy gap," students in I and J districts attend college, elite colleges at that, at rates which far exceed the college attendance and persistence rates of students in Abbott districts. This suggests that the solutions to the tough problems that face our schools and our students' success cannot be found solely in policies that exist on paper, but are equally, if not more so, tied to the resources, attitudes, practices, and relationships that exist in schools and communities to support student success.

You all well know the realities of school life in the communities we represent. The problems and challenges that exist in these schools must be addressed before new requirements are placed upon students, teachers, and parents who are already working hard to meet existing requirement in apartheid conditions.

In the spirit of new administrative and decision-making era, we ask that you assess the phase of proposal currently under way, evaluate the current capacity of our districts and the DOE to implement this proposal, and call for a process that will allow the voices of parents, students, and other community members to be central to the design and implementation of "smarter" secondary reform. After all, all of our kids deserve bright futures.